

Crossing Generations:
A Study of Fashion from the 1920s-1970s

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "DSaiki", is written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

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This project documents the process of conducting interviews as a primary source of learning about historical dress. The interviews took place at The Alpha Center, an adult day center, with clients who ranged in age from middle seventies to late eighties and selected students in a History of Costume course. The students were assigned a specific decade during the Twentieth Century, presented with different questioning techniques and prompted to conduct research about their respective decades prior to their interview times. During the interviews, students questioned clients about the different types of garments they wore during the various decades and how their clothing both affected and was affected by the major social movements during that time.

This portfolio depicts how each interview took place and what topics were mainly discussed such as what the clients typically remember doing while wearing certain items of clothing. Everything from weddings to wars was discussed during the interviews. In addition to photos and written descriptions of the actual interviews, this portfolio features the student-created in-class presentations, cased displays and original garment designs that were partially inspired by the interviews as well as by extensive outside research.

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Thesis Rationale

Throughout my academic career at Ball State University, I have been constantly intrigued with the correlation between historical social movements and their relative trends in fashion and everyday costuming. After extensively researching how clothing in the U.S. evolved during the different waves of feminism, my fascination with this topic only expanded. My original paper solely consisted of women's fashions of the Twentieth Century and how they were affected by the feminist movements. For example, women began to emulate the silhouette of men with loose, straight dresses during the 1920s because of their newly acquired right to vote. From this idea, I pondered what other trends had transpired directly because of major social movements.

After consulting with Dr. Saiki and learning of her intentions to conduct interviews with clients of The Alpha Center, an adult day center in Muncie, as a part of her History of Costume course, I considered how I would be able to integrate my interests into aiding other students, who were currently studying the historical phases of costume, gain a greater understanding of this topic as well. As we designed how the interviews would be organized and executed, I devised several methods of questioning in efforts to inspire the recall of memories related to the current social movements and fashion trends of specified decades of the Twentieth Century. To achieve the most accurate results, we began with the 1920s and ended with the 1980s, since most of the clients were at their prime during those decades.

With such a multifaceted topic, this project had several goals and objectives. Firstly, I wanted to discover whether or not people who had lived during these historical decades but who were not necessarily interested in fashion would be able to identify and describe what they wore during these decades. Secondly, I wanted to aid the students of the History of Costume class in gaining a first-hand perspective of how and why various trends during certain decades emerged. Since fashion both affects and is affected by social trends, it was hoped that students could develop a greater understanding of life during the Twentieth Century. In addition, by discussing monumental historical movements that changed the world in which we live today, I hoped that all the students would gain a greater respect for their elderly counterparts who lived during these events through the context of historical dress.

Method

Prior to beginning the interviews, Dr. Saiki and I met with a director at The Alpha Center to discuss the logistics of how the process would proceed. We addressed how to speak with the clients and what types of questions to ask as well as set dates and times of when the actual interviews would occur.

After this meeting, I researched how to evoke memories by using different questioning techniques. I then created a written guide that provided advice and tips on how they could prepare for the interviews and what types of questions they should focus on asking (see Appendix A). In addition to providing copies to the students, I gave a short presentation on this topic to better educate the students on this topic. During this presentation, I provided specific examples of how to apply the concepts described on the guide.

I also compiled a sample of photos from each of the decades used in this study. These photos featured the predominant styles of dress as well as any other significant fashions; these pictures acted as a platform for the students to base their preliminary research on. Also, I provided a brief list of the noteworthy events, popular activities and famed celebrities for each corresponding decade (see Appendix A). This was done so that the students would gain a basic understanding of what life was like during the decade and could further research these ideas and develop a greater understanding of how these affected the dress of the time.

Survey

In an effort to understand if students found the interviews informative and helpful in their research of the various decades of the Twentieth Century, I developed a short survey that explored the actuality of the previously stated objectives. The survey itself was divided into two parts—one for those students who actually participated in the interviews and one for the entire class (see Appendix B).

The first part focused on if the students felt this experience enhanced their knowledge of the life and styles of their respective decades. The latter portion of the survey concentrated on discovering whether or not the class as a whole found the descriptions of the interviews in classmates' projects interesting and an enhancement to overall learning. The survey also asks students if they would advise continuing this type of interviewing in future classes.

Results

After completing further research on their respective decades, students presented their projects in three different formats: slide show presentation, mannequin displays or original design (see Appendix C).

Eleven out of the forty-five students submitted the completed survey. The majority of the respondents gave positive feedback on the interviewing process.* For the most part, those who participated in the interviews found learning about life during the early and middle decades of the Twentieth Century from people who lived through them interesting and insightful. While some students felt that they did not learn any new information from the interviews, they did find that hearing about various historical events and their correlating fashion trends from someone who actually lived through them gave what was to them typically dry information an intimate, personal quality that inspired additional learning about certain topics.

Overall, most students felt that these interviews provided them with a greater understanding of the personality of the decade they studied. One student wrote, "It made [the era] seem more real" in response to a question about whether they felt this experience enhanced their knowledge. Other students felt that the interviews gave better insight into how their interviewees' personal lives than the decade as a whole, once again creating a more personable image of what real life was like during the decade. Another student noted that the interview provided her with interesting tales that would not be found in text books or by other conventional means of research. She wrote, "I learned that because of the

shortage of sheer panty hose [during the 1940s], they had to use “pancake” makeup on their legs to make it look like they were wearing hose. They even drew a line for the seam.”

Since she has taught this class for several years, Dr. Saiki was also able to comment on the effects that the interviews had on the students’ projects compared to previous years. In general, she claimed that this experience seemed to add to the actual context of students’ project in that they were able to describe various events and fashion movements with a more “down to earth” or realistic approach. Instead of simply researching the different trends in their decades from text books and the internet, they were able to actually speak and identify with someone who physically recounted the information in a personal manner. She also noted that these interviews seemed to have inspired some students to further their learning by conducting additional interviews with family members about their personal experiences, clothing that they wore and memories during the Twentieth Century.

*Survey results available upon request

Final Observations

With my previous background knowledge of many of the main social movements that affected Twentieth Century costume, I personally found this process incredibly interesting and informative. Hearing first-hand accounts of events that I previously studied helped me to understand just how much people's lives were affected and how that representation was portrayed in what they wore. When the interviews were completed and I was able to analyze the information that had been presented and discussed during them, I truly felt that this experience enhanced and increased my understanding of life during the Twentieth Century as well as how the fashions were both created and affected by the social movements.

After completing the interviews, witnessing the in-class presentations, viewing the displays and designs and reviewing the questionnaire, I was able to gain a greater understanding of what the students felt were the benefits and drawbacks of the process as well as discover if this experience enhanced their learning of the Twentieth Century. While some were less enthusiastic than others, the majority of respondents provided positive feedback on the experience and recommended that it be continued in future classes. I did notice that those who responded with the highest ratings conducted interviews about the earlier portions of the Twentieth Century. This did not come as a surprise since the clients were obviously much younger during these decades and most likely more observant of fashion trends and possibly more involved in the social movements.

Recommendations for Future Endeavors

With such promising experiences and results from this first experiment, I hope that other students will be encouraged to undertake future similar endeavors. Since this was the first occurrence of its type, areas for improvement were identified throughout the process.

Firstly, it should be explicitly explained and understood that the interviews are for supplemental purposes only. These interviews were intended to enhance students' understanding of what life was like for real people during the discussed decades. This process cannot provide the amount of factual information and historical data that traditional methods of research can; the interviews should only be considered an enrichment to extensive outside research.

Also, in efforts to conduct more informative and factually relevant interviews, it is advised that students be required to do some research prior to the actual interviews. This will help the students obtain a general understanding of real life during the decade as well as develop strong questions that could evoke memories and spark additional discussions. Topics such as current events, famous celebrities and popular activities are great tools to remind clients of the decade and inspire them to expand on what they remember doing and wearing during that time.

Appendix A

1. Interviewing Techniques
2. Decade Photos and Social Movements

Appendix A-1

Techniques to Evoke Memories

- Ask open-ended questions. Especially don't ask leading questions.
- Show pictures of people in your decade to inspire conversation.
- Use simply structured, single-stranded questions
 - If you have more than one point to pursue on a given topic, compose follow-up questions.
- Set a scene
 - "What were you doing when you first heard/saw . . . ?"
 - "What did you do for a living?" "What types of clothing did you wear when . . . ?"
 - "What effect did _____ have on your life?"
- Use all the senses to describe an item
- Give the interviewee points of reference from which to reminisce.
- Don't be afraid to let the interviewee go off on a tangent.
 - To get back on track ask, "Before you were talking about . . ."
- Prepare a list of questions. You don't need to follow it exactly. Other questions may arise during the interview, but they will give a solid organization and cohesiveness to your interview.
- Don't be afraid to wait for an answer!